

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 9, No. 1, January 1964. Single copies 50 cents. Subscriptions \$6.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$7.00 (in U. S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Publications office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. Second class postage paid at Concord, N. H. © 1963 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

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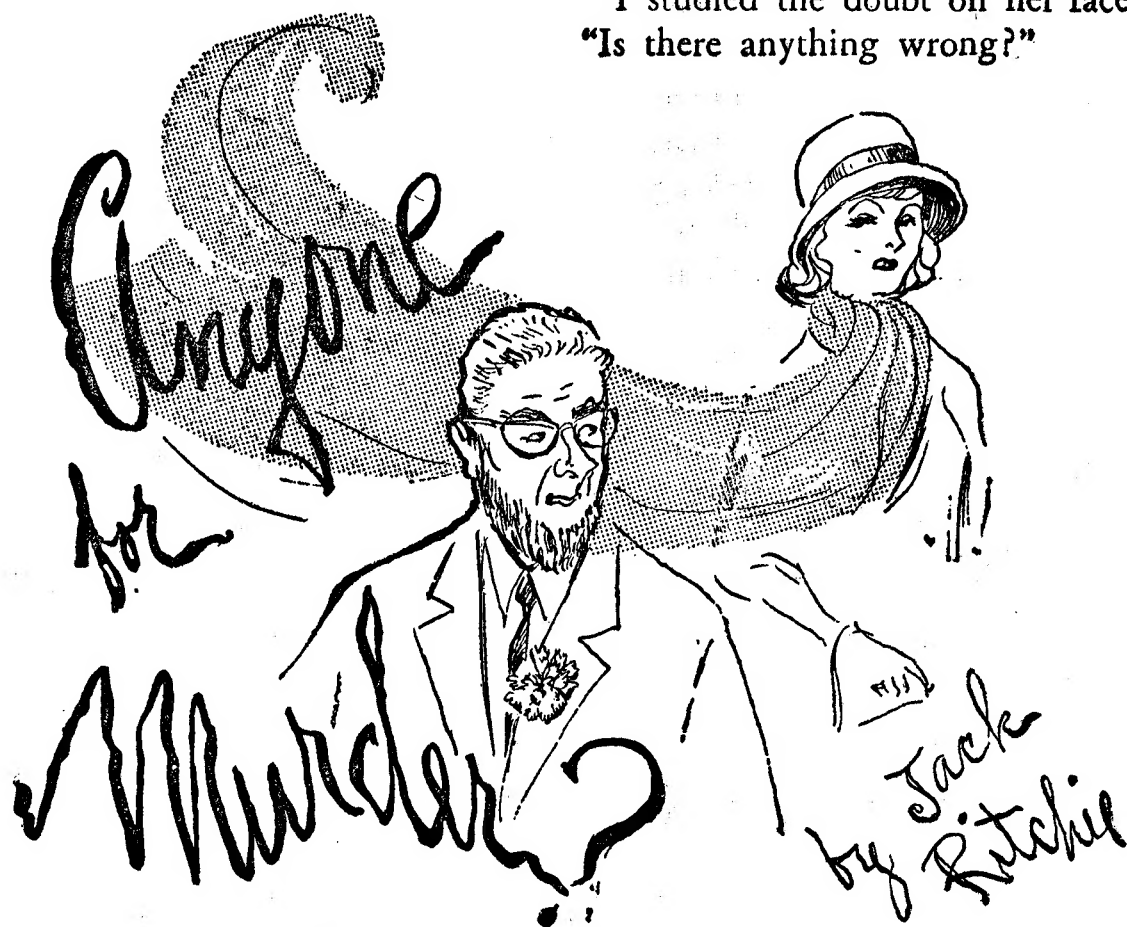
Let us hope that it is not true that "you can tell the ideals of a nation by its advertisements". Judging from our own example, we seem to purposely camouflage our intentions.

THE GIRL at the Classified Ads counter read my submission, chewed on her pencil, and then looked up uncertainly. "You want this put in our paper?"

"Yes. And I would like to have a box number for the replies."

The item I intended to insert in the *Herald Journal* read: *Are you hopelessly tied to your marriage partner? Perhaps there is one ultimate solution to your problem. All correspondence kept strictly confidential. Write Herald Journal, Box No. —.*

I studied the doubt on her face. "Is there anything wrong?"



ANYONE FOR MURDER?

The pencil received a few more indentations. "I'm new here. I don't know exactly what the policy of the paper is." She summoned a Mr. Wilson, who was evidently in charge of the section.

He read my sheet of paper. "Are you a lawyer?"

"No."

"I mean . . . aren't you referring to divorce?"

"No."

He cleared his throat. "Just what *do* you mean by 'one ultimate solution'?"

"I prefer to let the ad speak for itself."

And so I was channeled through other hands, ever upward, and finally ushered into the office of J. G. Bingham, advertising manager.

My sheet had preceded me and lay on his desk. He came directly to the point. "I'm afraid you'll have to explain this ad to my satisfaction or this newspaper cannot publish it."

I sighed. "Very well. My name is James Parkerson. I am a professor at the university, and my field is psychology."

He indicated the sheet. "And this has something to do with your field?"

"Yes. I am beginning a paper, and it is my thesis that perhaps ten times as many husbands and wives would be murdered by their mates

except for one psychological fact."

"That they are afraid of being caught?"

"That certainly is an important factor, of course. However, it is my contention that equally as important—if not more so—is the fact that people simply cannot bring themselves to the actual act. If they could *delegate* the act of murder—be able to hire someone else for the job—then there would be a tremendous increase in the number of violent deaths."

He frowned. "Do you mean to say that you're actually *advertising* to commit murder? Do you seriously expect people to answer this ad?"

"Of course. People are quite responsive to even the most ridiculous of things. For instance, several years ago an ad appeared in a national magazine consisting of the following words: *This is your last chance. Send one dollar to Box 107.* Just that and nothing more. Absolutely nothing was promised in return and yet thousands of readers mailed in their dollars.

"I specifically chose the words 'one ultimate solution'. The word 'murder' would, of course, frighten away everyone but the insane. I expect my replies to fall into two categories. The first will consist of letters from people who assume that I am a lawyer with some new

information about divorce laws. These will not serve for the purposes of my study and I will merely put them aside."

I had been standing, but now I took the chair Bingham indicated. "The letters in the second category will at first reading appear similar to those in the first, but the *seed* of murder will be there and I am sure that I will be able to detect it. These will be from people to whom the 'one ultimate solution' means something else, and they will be incredulously wondering: *Can it actually be possible? Can this ad really mean what I think it means?* And they will spend a little time and a stamp to cautiously probe."

Bingham was dubious. "But when they find out who you are and what your purpose is, won't they shy away immediately?"

"I do not intend to reveal to them who I actually am until my interviews are finished. For all apparent purposes I will be a professional murderer selling my services."

Bingham thought about it for a full minute and then rubbed his neck. "All right. I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing, but on the other hand I'm curious myself. We'll run the ad. For how long?"

"For the present, just one day."

He thought of something else.

"You'd better pick up your replies direct from this office. No telling but what some reporter might be waiting downstairs if you go to your box."

My ad appeared in that evening's *Herald Journal*. The next day, after my last class at the university, I appeared at Bingham's office to collect my replies.

Bingham appeared uncomfortable as he introduced the solidly built man with him. "This is Sergeant Larson of the bunco squad. He tells me that one of his jobs is to read the classified ads, especially personals, and to smell out anything fishy."

"There is absolutely nothing fishy about this," I said firmly. "Perhaps you'd better explain to the sergeant what I am doing."

Larson cut in. "He already has. But I'd like to check this out for myself. Let's see your wallet. Take out your money first."

I did as I was told and he examined the billfold. "Well, at least you've got Parkerson's wallet. I'll drop in at the university to make certain that you really are who you say you are."

Bingham handed me a small pack of envelopes. "These came in the mail this morning."

There were only six of them. I was a bit disappointed.

Larson watched me put them in

my pocket. "Are some of those from people who you think might want to have their husbands or wives murdered?"

"I haven't read them yet, but I believe so."

He put forward one hand. "Let's have the letters."

I ignored the extended palm. "Certainly not. These are addressed to me. They are my personal correspondence."

He scowled. "Look, professor, don't you want to *prevent* murder?"

"Of course. And ultimately my work will contribute to that direction. But first one must diagnose the extent of the disease before one can go about treating it. And besides, don't you see that none of these people will murder until they can actually hire someone? And while they are negotiating with me, they are at least temporarily neutralized."

Sergeant Larson accepted that reluctantly. "But when you're through negotiating, we want those names. We'd like to talk those people out of the notions they have."

I agreed. "It might be a breach of confidence, but on the other hand, I do see your point. When I am through you shall receive the names."

I drove home and was about to

enter my study when my wife, Doris, stopped me. "Dear, have you been thinking about what we'll do on your sabbatical year?"

"We'll stay right here," I said. "I'd like to do work on a new project of mine."

She sighed. "You work too hard, dear. I've been reading about those round the world trips on tramp steamers. Most of them take a limited number of passengers. Wouldn't that be a nice way to spend the year?"

I was impatient to get at my letters. "Doris, what is your reason for wanting to travel?"

"Why, to see new people, I imagine."

"Really? But don't you agree that people all over the world are basically pretty much alike?"

"Well . . . yes."

"In that case, Doris, what is the purpose of spending a lot of money to verify a fact which you already know?"

I went into my study, opened the six letters, and read them. Four fell positively into Category One. The remaining two were the ones in which I was interested.

I re-read the first.

Dear Sir:

I have just seen your most interesting advertisement in this evening's *Herald Journal*.

It occurred to me that per-

haps you do not know the possibilities of 'one ultimate solution'. Or do you?

If you wish to exchange letters, please insert the following ad in the *Herald Journal*: Lost. Collie dog. Male. Answers to name of Regis.

The letter was unsigned.

I studied the typewritten sheet of paper. The o's and e's were clogged and the rest of the type could have used a thorough brushing. The ribbon, too, was faded and should have been replaced. Except for the redundancy of 'Collie dog', and the spelling 'ocurred', the letter seemed literate enough.

Or was that spelling correct? I glanced about for my desk dictionary, but didn't see it. I rose and went to the doorway. "Doris, how would you spell 'occurred'?"

She thought a moment. "O-c-u-r-r-e-d."

That still didn't sound right to me. "Where is the dictionary?"

"It's on the secretary in the livingroom, dear."

I fetched the dictionary and returned to my study. The word was spelled with two c's.

I turned to the second letter in Category Two. It, also, was typewritten—without salutation or signature—and quite brief.

Mac's Bar. 21st and Wells.
Tonight. 8 P.M. Order Scotch.

ANYONE FOR MURDER?

Untie and re-tie right shoe lace.

Simple enough, I thought, and I would certainly keep the appointment.

I picked up the phone, called the *Herald Journal*, and had the ad concerning Regis, the lost Collie, inserted in tomorrow's newspaper.

When I hung up, my eyes wandered to the dictionary and then back to the first of the two letters. I stared at it for about five minutes and then took a blank sheet of paper to the typewriter.

I inserted it and typed: *It occurred to me that the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog. And also, It occurred to me that six quick movements by the enemy will jeopardize the five gunboats.*

I studied the words. They were dark and clear. No clogging of the o's and e's. I smiled sheepishly and crumpled the paper. Really, it was ridiculous what thoughts occasionally occurred to the human mind.

After supper, I put on my topcoat. "I'm going back to the university for a little while, dear. Have some work to do. No telling when I'll be back."

"All right, dear," she said. "By the way, did you notice that I cleaned your typewriter keys and put in a new ribbon?"

I paused in the process of putting

on my hat. "When did you do that?"

"This morning, dear."

I left the house. It was drizzling.

Millions of people misspell 'occurred', I reflected somewhat aggressively as I turned the ignition key of my car. They either use one 'c' or one 'r', or both. And typewriter keys are cleaned and new ribbons put on . . .

The motor caught and I drove on to Mac's Bar.

I found an empty stool at the bar and ordered a scotch. I untied and retied my right shoelace and then gazed expectantly about the place for someone to step forward.

No one did.

I glanced at the wall clock. Exactly eight. Perhaps he, or she, was late.

Ten minutes later an average-sized man entered Mac's Bar. I downed my drink and then, in a

clear carrying voice, ordered another scotch. I untied and re-tied my right shoe lace. The new patron ignored me.

I waited patiently for the next person to enter the tavern.

Eight patrons later, I decided to give up. Besides, I had succeeded in tying a completely unworkable knot in my right shoe lace.

When I entered my house, Doris appeared to be asleep upstairs. I finished a large bag of potato chips I vaguely remembered purchasing at Mac's Bar, and then went to bed. I had a bit of difficulty negotiating the stairs.

In the morning I had a splitting headache. It was entirely possible that I was allergic to potato chips. I managed to untie the knot in my shoe, and at breakfast I took nothing but coffee.

Doris looked worried. "Catching the flu?"

"Possibly." I finished my black coffee, took two aspirins, and left the house.

At the university, my morning classes dragged on interminably, and it was a profound relief to me when the noon hour finally came.

I managed to eat something at the faculty cafeteria and then decided that a stroll about the campus might do me good. I paused near the Memorial Union to light my pipe. As I glanced over the match



flame, I saw a tall, well-dressed man approach.

He smiled slightly. "How do you feel this morning?"

I had never seen him before, and the condition of my health was clearly none of his business.

He glanced down at my shoes. "I see that you got the knot untied."

I stared at him. "Were you. . . ? Did *you* send me that. . . ?"

He nodded. "Yes. And I was at Mac's Bar last night."

I bristled. "Then why the devil didn't you come forward? Especially before I purchased those potato chips."

"Because I am a very cautious man, and this is a cautious matter." He studied me. "What did you mean by one ultimate solution?"

I had not quite regained my temper. "Try me," I said bluntly.

He smiled faintly. "Murder?"

I hesitated, but then said, "Correct."

His eyes went over me again. "Just how much would you charge to murder my wife?"

I selected a number off-hand. "Ten thousand dollars."

The amount did not seem to disturb him in the least. "Just how would you go about doing it?"

"We would, of course, arrange that you have an alibi, and I would shoot your wife at that particular

time. You would not be involved."

He nodded. "Very simple, and therefore it should work, Professor Parkerson."

I was slightly disconcerted. "How did you know my name?"

"I followed you to your home last night and to the university this morning. I made it my business to find out who you are. And somehow, Professor, I simply do not believe that a man in your position would turn to murder, either as a profession or a hobby."

"Sir," I said stiffly. "Do you or do you not want me to murder your wife?"

"I am not married. Just what *are* you up to, Professor?"

"That is *my* business."

His eyes flickered. "I think I'll report this to the police. They might be interested."

"I already have clearance with the police. At least on the sergeant level."

"Or perhaps I should take my information to some newspaper reporter? He might find the story worthwhile."

That dismayed me considerably. While I wanted the publicity of a two line ad for one day, I did not want the publicity of a feature story. That would certainly frighten away all my prospective clients for the present and the future.

He pressed again. "Shall I go to

a newspaper with my information?"

I sighed. "No."

We sat down on a nearby bench and I told him about my project. He was thoughtful when I finished.

"Have you received any replies to your ad?"

"Six, so far."

He was silent for a few moments and then said, "Professor Parkerson, when you get the names of your clients—those in the second category—would you pass them on to me?"

"To you? Why?"

"I will pay you five hundred dollars for each name—providing, of course, that I ultimately do business with the client."

A light flickered in my brain. "Why do *you* want those names?"

He smiled. "One of the difficulties of my profession is establishing contact with prospective clients. I, of course cannot advertise for them. But you can."

I blurted the unnecessary question. "Your profession is *murder*?"

"Possibly we could work out some percentage arrangement instead," he said. "Let us say fifteen percent of anything I receive?"

I stood up. "I believe that it is now *my* turn to summon the police."

He shrugged. "What could you possibly prove? I would deny that

we ever had this conversation. And my name and fingerprints do not appear in police records anywhere." His eyes seemed to glitter. "You don't seem to realize how *big* we can make this. Your 'research' needn't be confined to just one locality. You can make it nation-wide. A veritable Kinsey report—in volume, at least. And your profession is a perfect legitimate front."

"Never. Absolutely never."

He was not perturbed. "I'll give you a little time to think it over, Professor. And remember that there are probably hundreds of other psychologists who might jump at the chance I'm offering you."

I watched him cross the street and get into a sleek 1963 convertible.

After my last class of the day, I drove home in my 1946 sedan.

Doris was sorting a mass of clothes. "For the rummage sale at church, dear."

I looked over the garments. "What is my brown suit doing there? That's the one I wore when we were married."

"It's worn, dear. I didn't know you were sentimental about it."

"I am not sentimental. But there is still a lot of good wear in it. Put the suit back into the closet."

"All right, dear. But you really

don't have to be married and buried in the same suit these days."

I regarded her speculatively. Why did she choose that particular expression? Married and buried.

I shrugged and went into the study. I reached for a sheet of paper. The population of the United States is approximately 186,000,000. Suppose one hundred thousand of those people wanted to get rid of their mates—surely a conservative figure. But why limit the field to husbands and wives? After all there are uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, friends. . . .

Suppose one could establish contact with just five thousand of them? And suppose one would average five thousand dollars per individual? That would come to twenty-five million dollars. And fifteen percent of twenty-five million was. . . .

I crumpled the paper abruptly and tossed it away. I turned to a stack of tests, and doggedly set about marking them.

On Thursday afternoon I went to the *Herald Journal*. In box number 1183 I found an envelope in response to my ad about Regis, the lost collie.

I read the note.

Dear Sir:

I have seen the ad concern-

ing Regis, your lost collie dog.

I think it is time we met. I suggest the Leoni Restaurant at the corner of 27th and Gerald at eight in the evening. Friday.

I shall be wearing a rose chiffon scarf and expect you to have a bachelor's-button boutonniere. I shall say, "Regis", and you will respond with, "black collar".

I re-read the words. The fact that the writer was a woman was now definitely established. And this time the typewritten words were clear and dark.

The Leoni Restaurant? Oh, yes. I remembered the place. Doris and I had dined there a year ago. Or was it two?

I thought about that for a while and then continued on home. When I entered the house, I said, "Doris, it's been some time since we went out to dinner. Suppose we make it Leoni's this Friday evening?"

She looked up from her magazine. "I'm sorry, dear. But that's my Womens' Club night. I'd cancel, but I'm chaplain this year and really ought to be there. When one becomes an officer in an organization, one must assume certain responsibilities, and attendance is one of them."

I put my hat back on. "I'm go-

ing outside for a short walk."

"But you just came in, dear."

"Nevertheless, I am going for a walk."

It was dark and windy outside. Was it possible that Doris was just playing some kind of trick on me? But how could she know about my project? It is my policy to be secretive about my work until I am fully into it. This saves the embarrassment of withdrawal, should the field prove to be an impossible one.

Or was it actually possible that Doris seriously entertained the fantastic notion of getting rid of me?

We'd been married ten years and, I had thought, happily. Of course ours had been the quiet life, but certainly Doris must be acclimated to something like that. I had deliberately married "in service", so to speak. Her father had been a Professor of Romance Languages and her mother Associate Professor in Zoology. Her recreation of the ecology of a pond is still the standard exhibit in that department.

Should I confront Doris and demand an explanation?

I shook my head. No. I had to find out just how far she really intended to go.

Should I wear a beard or something of that order when I met her at Leoni's? I'd see Professor

Tibbery of the Drama Department tomorrow and see what he could do for me.

A long convertible slowed down, passed me, and then drew to a stop at the curb. The tall stranger who made murder his business got out of the car and waited for me.

"Well, Professor, have you made up your mind to play along?"

A new chain of thoughts came to my mind. Why do people kill? For profit, of course. For passion. And in self-defense.

My eyes widened at the idea. Would I be morally justified in having Doris murdered before she had the chance to murder me? Should I hire someone to do the job for me? Like this man standing before me? I closed my eyes and wrestled with cold logic and warm emotion.

No. I couldn't have Doris killed. I had married her for better or worse, though this was considerably worse than I had expected.

"Well, Professor," the stranger said again. "Are you ready to do business?"

I opened my eyes. "We have absolutely no business to discuss."

He tilted his head slightly for ten seconds of reappraisal and then reached inside his topcoat. He produced a card and handed it to me. "I shall be at the Westland

Hotel for one more day. And let me remind you that there are other psychologists who might jump at this opportunity."

"Feel free to help yourself."

When the tail lights of his automobile disappeared around the corner, I took the card to the nearest lamp light. It contained no information besides the name. Charles A. Hasker. Was that his real name? If he truly did not have a record with the police, that could very well be. However it really did not matter. I would inform Sergeant Larson where Hasker could be reached.

Perhaps the police could do nothing about him at the moment, but on the other hand they would be informed of his existence and profession, and he could be watched. Eventually he would be apprehended.

When I reached home, I found my neighbor, Professor Conner, waiting at the chess board.

Why he continually chooses to drop in, I do not know. We have little in common. His field is zoology. I introduced the *divertissement* of chess because it is preferable to his conversation.

At eleven, he consumed two of Doris' tuna salad sandwiches and departed.

On Friday, after supper, Doris

went upstairs to dress for Women's Club. When she came down, she kissed me lightly. "I don't know exactly when I'll get back, dear. The subject for discussion tonight is Castro, and there's no telling how many resolutions we'll pass."

I regarded her moodily. "Have you forgotten anything? Like a rose chiffon scarf?"

"It's in my purse, dear. Do you mind if I take the car tonight?"

"I thought Professor Bronson's wife usually picked you up?"

"I told her not to. Frankly I'd like a little freedom of movement. Otherwise I always have to leave when she does."

When she left, I opened the closet and fetched the make-up Professor Tibbery had given me earlier in the day.

I reviewed his directions and propped up a mirror. Why in the world would Doris want to kill me? *Why?* For money? Ridiculous. Our assets were modest indeed.

For my life insurance? It was a fairly tidy amount, yet not so great that it should constitute a temptation. Was there another man? I smiled at that. There was absolutely not one iota of evil. . . .

I sat without moving for fully a minute.

Why did Professor Conner appear at our home so often? Was he

really interested in chess? Why did Doris always serve those confounded tuna salad sandwiches? They are definitely not *my* favorite.

And Conner is a bachelor. His interest is vertebrate zoology. Certainly a man who specializes in the lower vertebrates would eventually aspire to the higher. . . .

I glared at my now bearded reflection and then put on my pair of green-tinted sunglasses. On the way out of the house I stopped at the refrigerator and removed the bachelor's button boutonniere from its concealment behind the dill pickle jar.

I arrived at Leoni's at approximately eight and stood immediately inside the entrance, aggressively exhibiting my boutonniere.

Leoni's was a modest establishment containing about a dozen tables and a similar number of booths. My eyes searched the room. None of the women at the tables was wearing a rose chiffon scarf. I could not, however, see into the booths.

I remained standing where I was for five minutes and had about determined to make a personal inspection of the booths, when a woman of about twenty-five rose from one of the tables and approached me.

She spoke somewhat tentatively.

"Regis?" She stared at me warily.

I blinked. "You are not wearing a rose chiffon scarf."

"But I *am*."

Then I remembered my green-tinted glasses. I flushed slightly and removed them. Yes, she was wearing a rose chiffon scarf.

And I had never seen her before in my life.

"Black collar," I said weakly.

She led me to her table and I listened to her story. She wanted to get rid of her husband, but would not disclose the motive. Probably money, I thought, but I couldn't have cared less.

We quickly settled for a fee of ten thousand dollars and I made an appointment to meet her once again when we would thrash out details. But, of course, I had not the slightest intention of seeing her again. I would give her name and address to Sergeant Larson and leave it to him to dissuade her from murder.

As far as I was concerned, this was the end of my current project. Instead, I would devote my sabbatical year to constructing a personality silhouette of Certified Public Accountants. After all, that had been my second choice.

I went to the nearest bar and ordered a scotch and soda. I felt a sense of exhilaration which, I suppose, is normal to any man

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when he discovers that his wife does not want to kill him.

I lingered over three more scotches and at ten-thirty I left. It was about three miles to my house, a gibbous moon had risen, and I felt like walking.

The residential streets were quite silent and deserted, and so it happened that I noticed the automobile which passed me four blocks from my home.

It was my own sedan, and Doris was probably returning from Women's Club. The car pulled to the curb approximately one block ahead of me.

Ah, Doris had seen me, and was waiting.

But then something else occurred to me. I was still wearing the beard. How had she recognized me? And in the moonlight?

I frowned as I approached the car.

What I had taken for a rather bulky shadow in the front seat now parted. There were two people in the car. I stopped and stared into the window. Doris . . . and Professor Conner!

The two faces coldly returned my stare and conveyed the message that what was happening here was clearly none of my business.

My wife's voice came uncharacteristically hard. "Got nose trouble, mister? Move on."

I moved on.

At the corner I turned and immediately crouched behind the cover of a hedge to peer back. I had not been mistaken. They resumed their embrace. And in *my* car!

I timed them by my watch. Ten minutes. Fifteen. There was no indication when they would cease. I rose and marched toward the light of a public phone booth a block away.

How much would Hasker charge to permanently dispose of Doris? *And* Professor Conner? Probably some outrageous sum. Even with a fifteen percent discount, I doubted if I could afford it.

Or perhaps he would do it for nothing, if he and I became partners.

